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## PSB OP 051 Excavation Report

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## Site 51

The ten structures comprising Site 51 are split into two clusters that are roughly 105m apart. Structures 51-1/5 are dispersed atop a 5-6m-high extension of the eastern hills while the remaining buildings are organized around a patio on lower-lying terrain, occupying a 1m high eminence above the surface of the high terrace on the eastern margin of the Las Huertas/Hondo pocket. Sites 52 and 149 lie 365m and 115m to the northwest and north respectively. The perennial Rio Juncuntal is within 100m north of Site 51. Strs. 51-1, 8, and 9 were dug from May 22-23 and June 3-5, 1985, 20 person-days of labor being invested in exposing 14m<sup>2</sup>. All work was directed by Edward Schortman, Patricia Urban, Colleen Siders, and Marie Hamilton.

### Structure 51-1

Structure 51-1 is 19m east of its nearest neighbor, Str. 51-2, facing north over the high terrace surface ca. 5m below. It was investigated by means of a 1x5.6m trench (Subop. 51D) excavated along the approximate axial line of the building's south side. Digging was carried down to a maximum depth of 0.48m below ground surface beyond (south of) construction and 0.5m into architectural fill. A single construction phase was revealed in the course of this work.

### Excavated Lots

<u>Lot</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Date</u>
51D/1		Terminal Debris (Secondary)	?
51D/2		Fill	?

### Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.1	-	-
2	Str. 51-1-1st	U.1,2	-	-	EPC?
3	-	-	S.2	F.1	-

### Time Span 1

Stratum 1, a light brown, coarse-textured soil containing more small, angular gravel than earth, buries the lower 0.16m of Str. 51-1-1st's southern basal wall (U.1) and *may* run under construction. This earth level slopes up 0.13m over 0.74m south to north and was exposed to a maximum thickness of 0.16m adjoining U.1. Most likely, Str. 51-1-1st basal architecture would have been set into pre-existing earth levels to enhance stability. Consequently, we infer that S.1 was deposited by natural means prior to raising the investigated edifice. The large amount of

small, angular stones included in S.1 suggests that it represents a colluvial layer, likely eroded from the hills immediately to the east.

### Time Span 2

Structure 51-1-1st was raised during this interval. The building was a low platform the summit of which was reached on the south by stepping up and over a basal facing 0.4-0.45m high and composed of white, fine-grained angular stones set in a dark brown mud mortar (U.1). Unit 1 was poorly preserved; any sign of coursing had long since disappeared if, in fact, it had ever existed. The wall is 0.82m thick (reconstructed) and composed of rocks that range from 0.08x0.14m to 0.16x0.2m in size. Backing U.1 to the north is a fill of flat-laid angular rocks packed in a dark brown earth matrix (U.2). This hearting incorporates rocks outcropping from the ridge-top, confirming the evidence provided by the stratigraphic relationship between U.1 and S.1 that Str. 51-1-1st was erected atop a fairly barren promontory prior to the onset of significant soil formation processes. There is no clear sign how Str. 51-1-1st's summit was surfaced. Structure 51-1-1st was aligned a reconstructed 289 degrees, 30 minutes.

### Time Span 3

Abandonment of Str. 51-1-1st was succeeded by natural deposition of S.2, a dark brown, coarse-textured, organic rich soil. Stratum 2 buries all investigated portions of the platform. Feature 1 is embedded in this earth level and consists of stones dislodged from U.1, extending at least 1.84m south of that facing. The greatest concentration of debris lies adjacent to U.1 where F.1 is 0.3m thick.

### Structure 51-8

Structure 51-8 occupies the northwest patio corner, 7m west of Str. 51-7 and 4m north of Str. 51-9. The building was investigated via a 1x4.6m trench (Subop. 51C) dug against the approximate center of the building's south side. Excavations reached a maximum depth of 1.16m below ground surface, extending through fill into preconstruction levels. A single, poorly preserved construction phase was revealed in the course of this work overlying the remnants of a might be a still earlier version of Str. 51-8.

### Excavation Lots

<u>Lot</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Date</u>
51C/1	81 sherds 1 <u>jute</u> shell	Mixed Terminal Debris (Secondary) and Fill (Str.51-8-2nd)	EPC, LC
51C/2	35 sherds	Mixed Terminal Debris (Secondary) and Fill (Str. 51-8-1st)	EPC

51C/3		Fill (Str. 51-8-2nd?)	?
51C/4		Mixed Fill and Preconstruction	?
51C/5		Fill (Str. 51-8-2nd)	?
51C/6		Fill (Str. 51-8-1st)	?
51C/7	48 sherds	Fill (Str. 51-8-2nd)	LC
51C/8	1 cached vessel	Fill (Str. 51-8-2nd; Primary Deposit)	LC

### Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	Str. 51-8-2nd?	-	S.1	-	LC
2	Str. 51-8-1st	U.1	-	-	EPC
3	-	-	S.1,2	F.1	-

### Time Span 1

Time Span 1 witnesses the deposition of S.1, a brown, fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, greasy clay. Based on the distribution and attitude of tumbled architectural elements in F.1, it appears that S.1 during this interval rose 0.24m over 1.25m south-to-north on its southern exposed end, thereafter ascending 0.27m over 2.96m south-to-north. Stratum 1 was exposed to a maximum thickness of 0.68m; its base was not encountered in excavations. The few sherds recovered from this soil level hint at occupation here predating the raising of Str. 51-8-1st. We cannot rule out the possibility that the artifacts in question percolated down from overlying deposits. The pure Late Classic contents of the collection made from S.1 (lot 51C/7), as opposed to the predominately Early Postclassic assemblage found above, argue for acceptance of a Late Classic occupation during S.1's deposition.

Recovery of a cached Late Classic polychrome vessel (lot 51C/8) from ca. 0.44m below the top of S.1 in the north end of Subop. 51C poses a problem for the above interpretation. It seems unlikely, though not impossible, that a Late Classic container would be used to dedicate an Early Postclassic edifice. Lot 51C/8 may have been deposited in concert with the raising of a Late Classic platform now totally destroyed or S.1 itself may be the remnants of an earthen platform into the hearting of which the aforementioned vessel was placed. In the latter case we would have to allow for the existence of a ca. 0.5m-high construction (Str. 51-8-2nd) lacking any sign of stone facings. Such buildings are rarely attested in the Late Classic middle Ulua drainage but that factor alone does not rule out the above interpretation.

## Time Span 2

Unit 1, the surviving, revealed portion of Str. 51-8-1st, consists of a densely packed, flat-laid stone fill comprising the platform's hearting. Unit 1 stones are set in a dark brown soil matrix and the fill varies in preserved thickness from 0.28-0.46m. No wall survives to mark the southern limits of Str. 51-8-1st; U.1 was exposed over a reconstructed north-south distance of 3.38m (based on the packing and orientation of presumed fill stones). Unit 1 rides atop the S.1 ascent. No sign of formalized summit flooring remained to be identified in 1985. Unit 1 resembles Str. 51-9-1st's U.2 in the casual nature of its construction.

## Time Span 3

Following abandonment, Str. 51-8-1st was enveloped by the deposition of S.1 and 2. For at least 1.23m south of U.1, the stones of F.1 descend 0.2m, extending down into S.1. This distribution suggests that portions of S.1 were exposed during and immediately following Time Span 2, the tumbled architectural debris represented by F.1 resting atop and marking the former ground surface. If this is the case, the approximately 0.22m of S.1 burying F.1 in the southern portion of Subop. 51C was laid down following Str. 51-8-1st's abandonment. Subsequently, S.1, a dark brown, coarse-textured, moderately soft-compacted, organic rich soil, was deposited atop S.1 and most of the F.1 and U.1 stones.

## Structure 51-9

Structure 51-9, lying 4m south of Str. 51-8 and 14m west of Str. 51-6, closes off the west side of the patio surrounded by Strs. 51-6/10. A 1x2.8m trench (Subop. 51B) dug against the approximate center of the building's north flank was the sole excavation conducted on Str. 51-8. The probe was extended immediately east of the trench line following U.2 (the extension covering 1m<sup>2</sup> in all). Digging was carried to a maximum depth of 0.98m through and below fill associated with a possible late addition to the edifice's north side. At least one, more likely two, construction phases were revealed here.

## Excavation Lots

<u>Lot</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Date</u>
51B/1		Mixed Terminal Debris (Secondary) and Fill (U.2)	?
51B/2	91 sherds 1 scored censer lid 74 fragments of a reconstructable vessel 14 <u>jute</u> shells 1 tooth	Mixed Occupation Debris (S.1, Secondary) and Fill (U.2)	LC
51B/3	fragments of a	Occupation Debris, Predates U.2	LC

	reconstructable vessel (continuation of the vessel found in lot 51B/2)	(Secondary)	
51B/4		Fill (U.2)	?
51B/5	12 sherds 1 figurine <u>bajareque</u> fragments human bone	Occupation Debris buried by U.2 Fill and associated with a burial	LC
51B/6	sherds <u>jute</u> shells	Preconstruction Occupation Debris	?
51B/7		Preconstruction	?
51B/8	1 sherd 2 pieces of bone <u>jute</u> shells	Fill (U.2)	?

#### Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.1	-	?
2	Str. 51-9-1st	U.1,2	-	-	LC, EPC?
3	-	-	S.2	F.1	?

#### Time Span 1

The lower exposed 0.26m of S.1, a light gray-brown soil, underlies revealed construction. Deposition of this portion of the soil level, therefore, predates erection of Str. 51-9-1st. How much of S.1 may have been laid down now is impossible to say as its full depth was not revealed in excavation. Stratum1 was apparently deposited by natural means.

#### Time Span 2

Structure 51-9-1st was raised and, apparently, renovated during this span. The earliest uncovered construction is the platform's north basal facing (U.1). Unit 1 stood a preserved 0.81m tall and was fashioned of light colored angular stones with their flatter faces oriented outwards, all set in a brown mud mortar. Four horizontal courses are recognizable in the exposed segment; no chinking stones were recorded in U.1. The wall is oriented 267 degrees and stone sizes range from 0.12x0.14m to 0.16x0.25m. Unit 1 was almost completely buried by

a dense deposit of flat-laid angular rocks that look like fill for a late addition (U.2). Unit 2's base and top slope down 0.3-0.34m over roughly 1.9m away from (north of) U.1, as though built over a low, natural north-to-south rise (this ascent, if it existed, is not manifest by changes in soil color and/or texture). The U.2 stones are set in a brown earth matrix and are not retained by a clear facing on the north. Unit 2 varies from 0.71-0.83m thick. It appears that U.2 was a relatively casual construction appended to Str. 51-9-1st. This renovation probably maintained the earlier orientation, though this could not be verified given the poor state of U.2's preservation. Unit 2's Late Classic assignment is tentative; most of the associated artifacts apparently pertain to activities conducted prior to U.2's intrusion. The fragments of a large, partially reconstructable jar (lots 51B/2 and 3) in particular were found ca. 0.29m below the base of U.1, indicating deposition prior to construction of this facing. It is possible, therefore, that U.2 postdates the Late Classic. The casual nature of its construction, similar to architecture dated to the Early Postclassic elsewhere at Site 51 (Str. 51-9-1st, U.1) and in the middle Ulua basin, tentatively supports the later temporal assignment.

The U.2 addition also covered a fragmentary human burial placed against and about 0.06m above the base of U.1. This interment consists of a skull, detached, mandible, and four loose teeth associated with a patch (0.1x0.3m) of crushed bone. The skull is oriented northwest. This burial was likely introduced just prior to U.2's construction. It is not clear whether the artifacts found near the burial (lot 51B/5) were part of an original set of offerings or if they were accidentally associated with the skeleton.

### Time Span 3

Following abandonment, Unit 2's lower 0.46m were covered by continued deposition of S.1; the remaining 0.4m intervening between the top of S.1 and ground surface was filled with S.2, a dark gray-brown, organic-rich soil. Feature 1, composed of stone tumbled from U.2, extends at least 0.86m north of the latter construction. It is incorporated within the upper reaches of S.1 and lower 0.26m of S.2.

### Chronological Summary

Attested occupation at Site 51 commences in the Late Classic, at which time Str. 51-9-1st was raised and people were apparently present in the area later buried by Str. 51-8-1st. As noted above, the cached vessel found ca. 0.44m below the top of S.1 in the latter area presents a problem. The container dates to the Late Classic and yet was recovered from beneath the approximate center of what appears to have been an Early Postclassic platform. It is possible that the cache was originally dedicatory to a Late Classic building located on this spot. That edifice may have been completely destroyed or, more likely, what we have designated "S.1" was an earthen platform later covered by later cobble construction.

Subsequent Early Postclassic use of the settlement is attested at Strs. 51-1, 51-8, and, possibly 51-9. Structure 51-8-1st was likely raised at this time, based on analyzed ceramics from its fill and similarities between Str. 51-8-1st's construction style and other investigated Early Postclassic platforms along the middle Ulua. Structure 51-9-1st's U.2 may have been appended now onto the platform's north flank, as noted above. Architectural style is the sole line of evidence pointing to the erection of Str. 51-1-1st at this time; ceramic samples were not temporally diagnostic in this case. Structure 51-1-1st's location directly atop rock outcrops and

colluvium (S.1) implies that construction on this shelf began prior to the initiation of significant soil formation processes and soon after erosion of materials onto the ledge from the steep eastern slopes had ceased. A similar pattern is noted from nearby Sites 54 and 153 that also occupy exposed ledges within the eastern foothills. Apparently, parts of this zone were being pioneered relatively late in local prehistory, soon after their surfaces had stabilized and before they had developed soils to any significant depth. There is no sign of subsequent occupation at this locus.

### Architectural Summary

Late Classic construction at Site 51 is best represented by Str. 51-9-1st's north basal platform facing (U.1). Built of light colored, fine-grained, angular rocks set in a brown mud mortar, this wall rises 0.81m and is oriented 267 degrees. Four clear, horizontal courses were preserved in U.1 and the stones were apparently carefully set with their flatter faces oriented outward. It was not obvious whether these aspects had been artificially altered to create relatively smooth surfaces or if the builders simply selected rocks with naturally even faces. Structure 51-9-1st's northern addition (U.2) was more crudely fashioned, lacking the well-built facings of U.1. This may reflect a different approach to building, the deleterious effects of recent stone robbing on final-phase architecture, and/or a temporal shift, U.2 having been built in the succeeding Early Postclassic. Of the three alternatives we tend to favor the latter; stone robbing, though a problem at Site 51, did not reach depth of 0.7-0.8m below ground surface and so would not have affected U.2's basal construction. The tentatively identified Str. 51-8-2nd may be an earthen platform lacking stone retaining walls entirely. It ascends roughly 0.5m and was apparently dedicated via deposition of a polychrome vessel ca. 0.44m below the summit. This contrast between Strs. 51-9-1st and the putative Str. 51-8-2nd is striking and rarely attested elsewhere in the contemporary study zone.

Early Postclassic architecture at Site 51 is casual. In one case it consists of densely packed stone-and-brown earth fill set over (Str. 51-8-1st, U.1) a pre-existing Late Classic building. This construction lacks clear retaining walls, the latter probably having deteriorated beyond recognition soon after abandonment (possibly helped along by local stone robbing). Structure 51-8-1st's U.1 is 0.46m high; its orientation could be ascertained. As noted above, Str. 51-9-1st's U.2 may also have been raised during this interval; it is very similar in appearance to Str. 51-8-1st. Structure 51-1-1st, in contrast, seems to have been raised completely during the Early Postclassic. The poorly preserved southern basal wall (U.1) of this low (ca. 0.45m high) platform was revealed as was the stone-and-brown earth fill that backed it to the north. Architecture here, like the late additions to Strs. 51-8-1st and 51-9-1st, was casual; i.e., stones composing the basal wall were not set in clear courses nor were they oriented with their flatter faces to the exterior. Structure 51-1-1st's orientation is a reconstructed 289 degrees, 30 minutes.